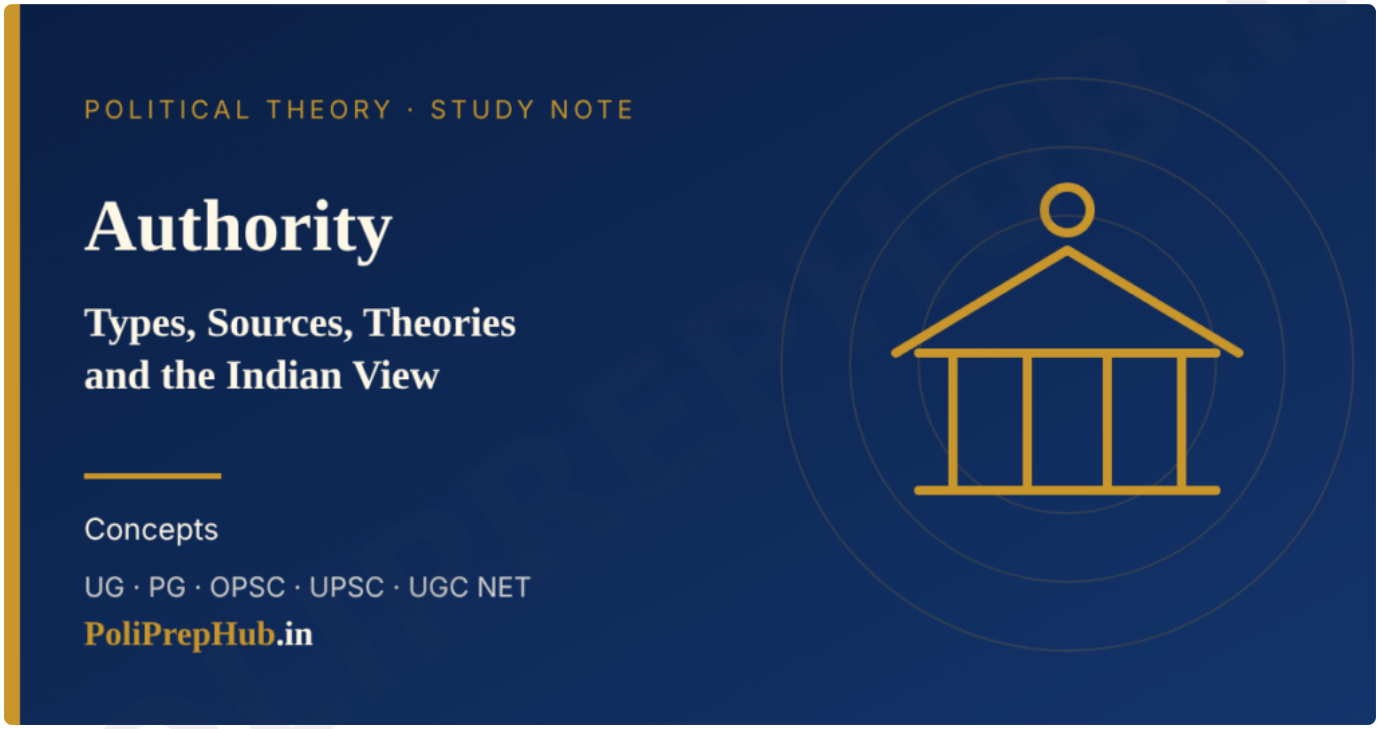
POLITICAL THEORY

Authority: Meaning, Types, Sources, Theories and the Indian Perspective

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 11, 2026 • 34 min read



Every society needs some persons or bodies who can make decisions for all and expect others to follow them. A teacher in a classroom, a judge in a court, a police officer on the road and a government that makes laws are all obeyed, and in most cases they are obeyed without the use of force. People follow them because they believe that these persons or bodies have a right to give orders. This right to command, which is accepted by those who obey, is called authority. It is the idea which separates the rule of a lawful government from the rule of a gang of armed men, and which explains why millions of citizens stop at a red signal even when no policeman is present.

Authority is one of the basic concepts of political theory, because it explains how political order is made stable. Power alone can compel people, but it needs constant watch and constant force, and it is costly to keep. Authority makes obedience easier, because the people who obey think that they ought to obey. For this reason, thinkers from Plato and Kautilya to Max Weber and Hannah Arendt have asked the same questions: what gives a person the right to rule, why should others obey, and where does the right of the ruler end? In this note, the meaning of authority, its characteristics, types and sources, the main theories, and the Indian view are explained in simple steps.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Table of Contents

01 1. Meaning and definitions of authority 4

02 2. Nature and characteristics of authority 6

03 3. Types of authority 9

04 4. Sources and bases of authority 11

05 5. Theories of authority 12

06 6. The Indian perspective on authority 15

07 7. Importance and limitations of the concept of authority 18

08 8. Critical analysis 21

09 9. Authors and books for UGC NET 22

10 10. Practice questions 23

11 Key takeaways 25

12 Twenty books for further reading 26

13 Frequently asked questions 27

POLIPREPHUB.IN

1. Meaning and definitions of authority

The word authority comes from the Latin *auctoritas*, which means right, influence, or the power to create and to advise. In the Roman Republic, the Senate held *auctoritas*, which meant that its advice carried great weight even when it had no power to command. In political theory today, authority means the recognised and accepted right to make decisions, to give orders and to be obeyed. It is different from simple ability to force a person to act, because it rests on the consent, trust or belief of the people who obey.

Scholar	Definition in brief
Max Weber	Authority is power which is accepted as legitimate by those who obey; it rests on a belief in the right of the ruler to rule
Robert Bierstedt	Authority is institutionalised power, which is power that has been given a recognised and lawful form
R. M. MacIver	Authority is the established right, within a social order, to determine policies and to settle disputes
Hannah Arendt	Authority is obedience in which men retain their freedom, and which needs neither force nor argument
Richard Friedman	Authority is a right to command, joined with a duty on the part of the subject to obey, which is not based on the content of the order
Joseph Raz	Authority gives a person a reason to act which replaces the person’s own reasons, so that the order is followed because of who gave it
Harold Laski	Authority is the right to command, which rests on the willing consent of those commanded
Carl Friedrich	Authority is a quality of communication which can be reasoned and elaborated, and which gives the one who holds it a claim to be obeyed
Herbert Simon	Authority is the power to make decisions which guide the actions of others, who accept them without examining them

POLPREPHUB.IN

Weber on authority. Max Weber, in *Economy and Society*, did not use the word authority in the loose way of everyday speech. He spoke of *Herrschaft*, which is translated as domination or legitimate authority, and described it as the chance that a command with a given content will be obeyed by a given group of persons. He added that this chance depends on a belief, held by the people who obey, that the command is legitimate. For Weber, therefore, a ruler is not a legitimate authority simply because he has the strength to compel, but because the ruled accept his claim as rightful.

Bierstedt on authority. Robert Bierstedt, in his article “An Analysis of Social Power” (1950), defined authority as institutionalised power. He meant that when power is given a regular form, with rules, offices and procedures, it becomes authority. The power of a gang leader is not authority, but the power of a district collector is, because it comes from an office created by law and is limited by rules.

MacIver on authority. R. M. MacIver, in *The Modern State* and *The Web of Government*, treated authority as the right to guide and direct others which is recognised by the community. He stressed that the state could not rest on force alone, and that all lasting government has to have the acceptance of the governed.

Arendt on authority. Hannah Arendt, in her essay “What Is Authority?”, argued that authority is neither force nor persuasion. Force makes people obey by violence, and persuasion works by argument, which assumes equality between the speaker and the listener. Authority, she said, is the kind of obedience in which the person who obeys remains free, because he recognises the superiority of the one who commands. She gave the examples of the Roman Senate and the Church to show how this respect, once lost, cannot easily be won back by force.

Friedman and Raz on authority. Richard Friedman and Joseph Raz are the main modern philosophers of authority. Friedman held that to accept an authority means to treat its command as a reason for action without examining whether the content of the command is good. Raz, in *The Morality of Freedom* (1986), explained this by his “service conception”: a person has legitimate authority when following its orders helps the subject to act better on

POLIPREPHUB.IN

the reasons which already apply to him than if he tried to act alone. A doctor’s advice or the traffic rules are examples.

Laski and Friedrich. Harold Laski, in *A Grammar of Politics*, said that authority rests on the consent of the people who obey, and that when consent is lost, the right to command is lost with it. Carl Friedrich linked authority to the capacity for reasoned elaboration, which means that the holder of authority can give good reasons for his decision, even when he does not have to give them every time.

Authority and the related ideas.

Concept	Meaning	Difference from authority
Power	Capacity to get one’s will carried out, even against resistance	Power may exist without any right; authority is power which is accepted as rightful
Force	Use of physical compulsion	Force removes choice; authority is obeyed willingly, with the sense of duty
Influence	Ability to change another’s views or actions by persuasion or example	Influence has no claim to obedience; authority does
Legitimacy	The quality of being accepted as rightful	Legitimacy is the ground of authority; authority is the right that results from it
Persuasion	Winning agreement by argument	Authority does not need argument for each order
Coercion	Threat of harm to secure compliance	Coercion works by fear; authority works by acceptance
Sovereignty	Highest and final legal authority in a state	Sovereignty is the supreme form of authority; ordinary authority may be limited and shared

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2. Nature and characteristics of authority

Authority is a social relation between a person or body that commands and those who obey. It is found in the family, the school, the army, the church, the party and, above all, in the state. In political theory, the chief interest is in political authority, which is the right of the

state and its officers to make laws and to have them obeyed. The following are the main characteristics of authority.

- **Right to command.** Authority is not simply the ability to make others act. It is a right, recognised by those who obey, to give orders. A magistrate who orders a person to appear in court has this right, while a thief who orders a person to hand over his purse has only the ability to threaten. The idea of right is therefore the first feature that separates authority from mere force.
- **Acceptance by the obeying.** Authority depends upon the willingness of the people to accept it. When citizens believe that a government is lawful, they pay taxes and follow rules even when they dislike them. When the belief fails, as in the last years of many colonial and autocratic governments, orders are ignored and the authority collapses, even though the army and the police remain.
- **Rests on legitimacy.** Every authority is built upon a ground of legitimacy, which tells why the ruler should be obeyed. This ground may be tradition, law, religion, or the personal gifts of the leader. Without such a ground, a ruler has to rely on fear. The study of authority is therefore the study of the reasons which people give for obedience.
- **Connected with duty to obey.** Authority creates in the subject a sense of duty. A citizen obeys a lawful order not only because he fears punishment, but because he feels that it is right to obey. Thus a driver stops at the signal at night on an empty road because he accepts the rule as binding, which shows how authority works inside the mind.
- **Institutional and organised.** Authority usually belongs to an office and not to the person alone. The authority of a Prime Minister belongs to the office, and when the holder changes, the authority passes to the successor. This makes authority stable and continuous, and it is the reason why political order does not fall apart each time a ruler dies.
- **Limited in scope.** Authority is always limited to a certain area of life and to certain persons. A teacher has authority over students in class, but not over their private lives at

POLIPREPHUB.IN

home. A government has authority within the law, but a minister who goes beyond the powers given by the Constitution acts without authority. Limits are therefore a necessary part of the idea.

- **Hierarchical.** Authority is arranged in levels, in which higher offices command lower ones. In a government department, the secretary gives orders to the section officers, who in turn guide the clerks. This chain of command makes it possible for a large organisation to act as one body, and it also tells where responsibility rests.
- **Based on rules.** Modern authority works through rules, procedures and records. A police officer who arrests a person must follow the Code of Criminal Procedure, and an order which breaks the rules may be challenged in court. In this way, the rule of law places authority under a higher law and protects the citizen from the whim of the officer.
- **Different from force and manipulation.** Authority does not need the constant use of force, and it does not work by deceiving people. A government which has authority can usually have its laws obeyed by the great majority of citizens without sending the police to each house. This saving of force is one of the great merits of authority.
- **Dynamic and changing.** The sources of authority change with time. In traditional societies, the authority of the chief or the priest was accepted as part of the natural order. In modern societies, people ask for reasons and look for elections, laws and results. Authority can therefore grow or decline, and a government that fails to deliver or to keep promises loses it by degrees.
- **Involves responsibility.** The holder of authority is expected to use it for the common good and may be called to account. In a democracy, ministers answer to the legislature, and officials answer to the courts and to audit bodies. Authority without accountability slides into tyranny, and so responsibility is a part of its proper meaning.
- **Can be delegated.** The holder of authority can pass a part of it to others, while keeping the final responsibility. A Chief Minister delegates powers to ministers, and a district collector to sub-divisional officers. Delegation allows authority to reach the lowest levels of administration, but the person who delegates does not lose his own right to supervise.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

3. Types of authority

Weber's three types of legitimate authority. Max Weber gave the best-known classification of authority, according to the ground on which the claim to obedience rests. He called these pure types, and he said that in real life they are mixed.

Type	Ground of obedience	Example	Chief weakness
Traditional authority	Belief in the sanctity of old customs and in the right of those who rule under them	Hereditary monarchy, tribal chief, village headman, patriarch in the family	Resists change and may become arbitrary
Charismatic authority	Devotion to the exceptional holiness, heroism or character of one person	A prophet, a war hero, a revolutionary leader such as Gandhi or Lenin	Unstable, as it fades with the leader; the problem of succession
Legal-rational authority	Belief in the legality of rules and in the right of those raised to power under them to give orders	Modern government, civil service, courts, army	Can become rigid and impersonal; rule by the rule book, the iron cage

Traditional authority. In this type, the ruler is obeyed because of custom and status. The master gives orders and the servants follow, because it has always been so. Weber described forms such as gerontocracy (rule of the elders), patriarchalism (rule of the head of the household) and patrimonialism (rule of a ruler who treats the state as his own household). The village panchayat of old India and the rule of the king by lineage fit this type.

Charismatic authority. The word charisma comes from a Greek term for a gift of grace. Here the people obey the leader because they believe that he has extraordinary qualities. Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and in modern times leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi and Subhas Chandra Bose have been described in this way. Weber held that charisma is a force for change and revolution, but that it is unstable, because it depends on the leader's continued success. After the death of the leader, charisma must be "routinised", which means turned into either tradition or legal rules.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Legal-rational authority. This type is the characteristic form of the modern state. The person obeys not the individual, but the impersonal order, which is the law. Officials hold their position by appointment and act within fixed limits and in the written rules. Weber described bureaucracy as the purest form of this type, with its offices arranged in hierarchy, appointment by merit, fixed salaries and written records. The Indian administrative service, the courts and the Election Commission follow this model.

Other classifications of authority.

Basis of classification	Types	Meaning
Legal standing	De jure and de facto authority	De jure authority is held by right under law; de facto authority is actually exercised, though it may not have a legal right, as in a government set up by a coup
Area of life	Political, legal, economic, religious, moral, parental, educational	Each field has its own source and limits, such as the authority of the court, the Church or the teacher
Source of knowledge	Epistemic or expert authority	Respect for the knowledge of a doctor, an engineer or a scientist, as in the advice of an expert on public health
Theoretical and practical	Theoretical authority (what to believe) and practical authority (what to do)	Raz and Friedman separated the authority which guides belief from the authority which commands action
Form of rule	Autocratic, democratic and bureaucratic authority	Authority held by one person, by the elected representatives of the people, or by appointed officials
Source in organisation	Line and staff authority; formal and informal authority	Line authority gives the right to command in the chain; staff authority gives advice; informal authority arises from respect, not office

POLPREPHUB.IN

Authority in the family and in society. Authority is learnt first at home, where parents guide children, and it later extends to the school, the workplace and the community. Scholars such as Erich Fromm and Theodor Adorno studied the “authoritarian personality”, and showed that attitudes to authority formed in childhood can influence the political outlook of the adult. A society in which people obey without question can fall under dictatorship, while a society in which no authority is accepted cannot keep order. For this reason, democratic thinkers have asked for a rational authority, which depends on reasons, and not an irrational authority, which depends on fear or blind faith.

4. Sources and bases of authority

The question “where does authority come from?” has been answered in different ways in different ages.

Source	Explanation	Example
Divine or religious sanction	The ruler is said to rule by the will of God or to be a representative of God	The divine right of kings in Europe; the king as the earthly form of the gods in some ancient texts
Tradition and custom	Long practice makes the right to rule appear natural and just	Hereditary chiefs, the village elders, the caste panchayat
Consent of the governed	People give authority to the ruler by agreement, vote or social contract	Elected governments, as in the theories of Locke and Rousseau
Law and constitution	A written constitution lays down who may rule and how	The President, Parliament and courts of India under the Constitution
Personal qualities	The leader’s character, courage and ability inspire devotion	Gandhi in the freedom struggle
Knowledge and expertise	Specialised knowledge gives a claim to guide others	A doctor’s advice, the Election Commission’s expertise, a judge’s legal learning

POLPREPHUB.IN

Performance and results	A government that gives security and welfare earns respect	Public approval of governments that deliver services
Election and representation	Periodic free elections renew the claim to rule	The Lok Sabha, State assemblies, panchayats

5. Theories of authority

Thinkers have given different answers to the question why a person is bound to obey. The main theories are described below.

Divine theory. In the oldest view, authority comes from God. Kings were said to rule as agents of the gods, and to disobey the king was to disobey the divine order. In Europe, this took the form of the divine right of kings, defended by James I of England and Robert Filmer in *Patriarcha*. St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas held that all lawful authority comes from God, though Aquinas added that an unjust law has no binding force. The theory gave strength to rulers, but it was rejected as the modern state came to be based on the will of the people.

Social contract theory. The contract thinkers explained authority as the result of an agreement among free individuals.

- **Hobbes.** In *Leviathan* (1651), Thomas Hobbes said that, in the state of nature, life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”. To escape this, individuals agreed to give up their rights to a sovereign, who then has absolute authority. Obedience is a duty so long as the sovereign protects the lives of the subjects.
- **Locke.** In *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), John Locke held that authority is a trust given by the people to protect life, liberty and property. If the government breaks the trust, the people have the right to remove it. Authority is thus limited and based on consent.
- **Rousseau.** In *The Social Contract* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that legitimate authority rests on the general will of the people. By obeying the general will, the citizen obeys himself, and so remains free. For Rousseau, no man has a natural authority over

POLIPREPHUB.IN

his fellow men, and only agreements give a right to command.

Weber’s theory of legitimate domination. Weber held that all stable authority rests on a belief in its legitimacy, and he named the traditional, charismatic and legal-rational grounds. His theory is the most widely used framework in the social sciences, because it links authority to the beliefs of the obeying people and not to a fixed moral standard. He also linked the rise of modern capitalism and the state with the spread of rational-legal authority and bureaucracy.

Functional theory. Talcott Parsons treated authority as an institutionalised form of power, which serves the needs of a social system by allowing collective goals to be achieved. Chester Barnard, in *The Functions of the Executive* (1938), gave the “acceptance theory” of authority in organisations: authority does not flow from the top down but depends on the acceptance of the person who receives the order. An order is binding only when the person understands it, believes it consistent with the purpose of the organisation, and is able to comply. Herbert Simon later explained the “zone of acceptance”, within which subordinates obey without question.

Arendt’s theory. Hannah Arendt, in *Between Past and Future* (1961), argued that authority in the true sense has nearly vanished from the modern world. She held that it is different from both force and persuasion, and that it needs respect for a foundation, such as the founding of Rome. When tradition, religion and authority are all weakened, modern societies become open to violence and to totalitarian rule, which she called a form of rule without authority.

Philosophical anarchism and the critique of authority. Robert Paul Wolff, in *In Defense of Anarchism* (1970), argued that the duty of autonomy, which is the duty to take responsibility for one’s own actions, is in conflict with the claim of the state to command. If a person simply obeys because the state has said so, he gives up his moral freedom. Wolff concluded that no state can have legitimate authority, unless it is a direct democracy with unanimous consent. Classical anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Proudhon also rejected the authority of the state and the Church as a form of domination.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Raz and the service conception. Joseph Raz answered Wolff by saying that obeying an authority can help a person to act better on reasons which he already has. A legitimate authority is one which, when its commands are followed, enables the subject to do what he ought to do more successfully than by acting alone. Raz also gave the “pre-emption thesis”: the authority’s directive replaces the subject’s own reasoning, and does not just add to it. This theory explains why we follow the instructions of experts and of public bodies.

Marxist and critical theories. Marxists argue that authority in class society is a form in which the dominant class gives its rule the look of a right. Gramsci’s idea of hegemony shows how the ruling class obtains the consent of the others through culture, religion, education and the media, so that its rule appears as natural. Frankfurt School thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer studied how authority works through the family and mass culture. Engels, in his essay “On Authority” (1872), argued that some authority is needed even in a socialist society, for example in a factory or a railway, though he held that the political authority of the state would wither away.

Foucault and authority. Michel Foucault rejected the idea of authority as a thing that is held by a sovereign. For him, authority and power operate through institutions such as the school, the clinic and the prison, in the form of discipline and of knowledge. His idea of governmentality shows how the modern state shapes the habits of citizens, so that people come to govern themselves. This view draws attention to the less visible side of authority.

Liberal and democratic theories. Liberal thinkers such as J. S. Mill held that authority has to be limited, and that it is justified only to prevent harm to others. Democratic thinkers hold that authority is legitimate only when it is based on the free consent of equal citizens, on public discussion and on the rule of law. Contemporary writers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas find the source of legitimate authority in a fair procedure and in reasoned public agreement.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Theory	Chief thinkers	Source of authority	Main idea
Divine	Augustine, Aquinas, Filmer	God	Ruler is the agent of God
Social contract	Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau	Agreement of individuals	Authority is created by consent for security, rights, or the general will
Legitimate domination	Weber	Belief in legitimacy	Traditional, charismatic and legal-rational types
Functional and acceptance	Parsons, Barnard, Simon	Acceptance by the subordinate	Authority works when orders are accepted
Arendt’s	Arendt	Respect for a founding and tradition	Authority is neither force nor persuasion
Anarchist	Wolff, Bakunin, Proudhon	None legitimate	Authority conflicts with autonomy
Service conception	Raz	Better compliance with reason	Authority is justified if it helps one act on right reasons
Marxist and critical	Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Adorno	Class interest and hegemony	Authority hides class rule
Foucauldian	Foucault	Discipline and knowledge	Authority is spread through institutions

6. The Indian perspective on authority

Vedic and epic traditions. In the early Vedic period, the king (*raja*) was chosen or accepted by the assembly (*sabha* and *samiti*), and his authority was limited by custom and by the advice of the elders. Later, the Brahmanas and the epics described the king as the protector of dharma. In the *Shanti Parva* of the Mahabharata, there is a story that people, suffering from anarchy (*arajakata*), appealed to the gods and appointed a king to protect them, and agreed to pay him a share of their produce. This story has often been compared with the contract theory of the West, as it shows authority arising from the need for order and from agreement.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Dharma as the limit on authority. In the Indian tradition, even the king was under dharma. The king was the upholder of dharma and not its maker, and the *Manusmriti* and the Mahabharata say that a king who rules against dharma loses the right to rule. The sacred law, the customs of the people and the advice of the learned thus placed limits on royal authority. The ideal of *raja-dharma*, the duty of the king, asked him to protect the subjects, to punish the wicked and to take only a fair share of the revenue. This is a form of authority that is bound by duty.

Kautilya on authority. In the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya gave a worldly and practical account of authority. He held that the king must be strong, learned and disciplined, and that his authority depends on *danda*, which is the lawful power to punish. He wrote that when danda is used justly, it protects the people and the order of society, but when it is too harsh or too light, it breaks the order. He also said that the happiness of the subjects is the happiness of the king, and that the king’s duty is to work for the welfare of the people. Kautilya advised a rule by officials selected for their ability, with systems of audit and of spies to check misuse. In this way, authority is joined with administrative method.

Buddhist and Jain views. Buddhist texts such as the *Aggañña Sutta* of the Digha Nikaya describe the first ruler (*Mahasammata*) as one chosen by the people to keep order and maintain justice, in return for a share of the harvest. This gives authority a base in agreement. Emperor Ashoka, in his edicts, described his rule as that of a father to his children, and stressed dhamma, which means moral duty, and the welfare of the people, as a ground of his authority.

Medieval period. In the Sultanate and Mughal periods, authority was linked with the ruler’s claim to divine favour and with law-giving. Akbar’s policy of *sulh-i-kul* (peace with all) and the system of mansabdari gave authority a wide, administrative basis. In the villages, the caste panchayat and the village council exercised local authority by custom, and they settled disputes and enforced social rules.

POLPREPHUB.IN

Colonial authority. The British established authority based on conquest, law and a modern bureaucracy. They justified it as the “rule of law” and the “civilising mission”. The nationalist critique, from Dadabhai Naoroji and R. C. Dutt to Gandhi, argued that colonial authority lacked the consent of the Indian people and drained the country’s wealth. The Indian national movement, in this way, questioned the legitimacy of foreign rule and proposed a new basis in self-rule.

Gandhi on authority. Gandhi held that the real source of authority is the people and the moral law. In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), he criticised the modern state as an organised force, and he advised citizens to refuse obedience to unjust laws through *satyagraha*, since no government can rule without the cooperation of the ruled. He gave the idea of *swaraj*, which was self-rule and self-discipline, and of *Ram Rajya*, as an ideal of authority based on truth and moral rule. He praised the village republic (*gram swaraj*), in which authority is spread among the people. For Gandhi, authority which is based on love and service deserves obedience, while authority based on force and injustice can be resisted.

Ambedkar on authority. B. R. Ambedkar rejected the authority of caste and scripture, which gave a person’s position by birth. He argued, in *Annihilation of Caste*, that the authority of the shastras must be questioned by reason, and that no custom which denies equality can have a claim to obedience. He held that the proper foundation of authority in modern India is the Constitution, based on liberty, equality and fraternity. In his last speech to the Constituent Assembly (1949), he warned against “hero-worship” in politics and advised citizens to follow constitutional methods and to give up methods of protest that would undermine the rule of law, since in politics hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and, in the end, to dictatorship.

Authority in the Constitution of India.

- **Source in the people.** The Preamble begins with “We, the people of India”, which makes the people the source of constitutional authority. All public offices are held under the Constitution, and by election or lawful appointment.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

- **Division of authority.** The Constitution divides authority among the Union, the States and local bodies by the Seventh Schedule, and among the legislature, the executive and the judiciary by the separation of powers.
- **Limits by rights.** Part III on Fundamental Rights, and Articles 14, 19 and 21 in particular, limit what any authority may do, and Article 13 declares void any law which takes away these rights.
- **Judicial review.** The Supreme Court and the High Courts may strike down laws and executive acts which violate the Constitution, as in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), where the Court held that the basic structure of the Constitution cannot be changed even by Parliament.
- **Independent authorities.** The Election Commission, the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Union Public Service Commission and similar bodies have an independent constitutional authority, to protect the fairness of the system.
- **Local self-government.** The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) gave constitutional status to panchayats and municipalities, and so brought authority nearer to the people.

Traditional authority in modern India. Despite the legal-rational structure, many forms of traditional authority continue. Caste panchayats, khap panchayats, religious heads and tribal councils still have a strong hold in some places. The relation between these and the constitutional order is a matter of continuing tension, as in court decisions which have held illegal the orders of khap panchayats against inter-caste marriages. Leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Indira Gandhi and, in the present, many popular leaders, have drawn on charisma as well, and Weber’s types can all be found in Indian politics.

7. Importance and limitations of the concept of authority

Importance.

- **Basis of political order.** Authority makes it possible for a society to be governed without constant use of force. It brings stability and predictability, so that citizens know who may decide what, and may plan their lives.

POLITREPHUB.IN

- **Reduces the cost of governing.** When people accept the right of the government to rule, enforcement is cheap, since most laws are obeyed voluntarily. A state which depended on force alone would require a policeman for each citizen, and would soon collapse.
- **Makes law effective.** Laws are only words on paper until they are accepted as binding. Authority gives the law its practical force, and turns the decisions of the legislature and the courts into rules of conduct.
- **Allows coordination.** In a large society, many persons must act together, as in the traffic, the tax system or the defence of the country. Authority supplies a single source of decisions which solves the problems of coordination.
- **Separates legitimate from illegitimate rule.** The concept lets us ask whether a government has the right to rule, and so provides a standard for judging regimes, coups and occupations. It helps to explain why some governments last and others fall.
- **Protects the weak.** When authority is exercised under law, it protects individuals from the arbitrary will of the strong. The rule of law places even the highest officials under rules, and gives the citizen the right to challenge them in court.
- **Basis of institutions and organisation.** Schools, hospitals, businesses and the army work by assigned authority. Without it, there would be no division of work, no responsibility and no way of settling disputes.
- **Supports the use of expertise.** Epistemic authority allows society to benefit from the knowledge of specialists, as in medicine, engineering and law, so that decisions are better informed.
- **Links liberty and obedience.** Rousseau and Raz show that authority can be consistent with freedom, when it rests on consent or serves reason. The concept helps to explain why a free citizen may rightly obey the law.
- **Aids the study of political change.** Weber’s types help us to understand revolutions, the rise of charismatic leaders, the growth of bureaucracy and the transfer of power, and to study how authority is lost and gained.

POLIPREPHUB.IN

Limitations and difficulties of the concept.

- **Dispute over the meaning.** Scholars disagree on whether authority is a form of power, a relation of trust, or a moral right. Different writers use the term for different things, which makes it hard to apply.
- **Belief-based test of legitimacy.** Weber's definition rests on what people believe to be legitimate, and not on whether the rule is in fact just. By this test, a regime which has successfully deceived its people would be called legitimate, which many critics find unsatisfactory.
- **Risk of blind obedience.** Where authority is stressed without limit, citizens may follow harmful orders. The Nuremberg trials and Stanley Milgram's experiments (1963) showed that ordinary persons may do cruel acts when told to by an authority figure.
- **Conflict with autonomy.** Wolff and the anarchists argue that to obey an authority just because it commands is to give up one's own moral judgement. The problem of reconciling the two has not been solved fully.
- **Hides domination.** Marxists and feminists point out that authority may be a cover for class, caste, patriarchal or racial domination, and that what is called legitimate may merely be accepted because of habit or ideology.
- **Difficult to measure.** Belief in legitimacy is an inner attitude, which cannot easily be measured. Surveys of trust in institutions give only a partial picture.
- **Pure types are rare.** Weber's three types seldom occur in pure form, and real regimes combine them. The scheme may therefore explain less than it appears to, and it may not fit societies with other bases of rule.
- **Western origin.** Many theories grew out of Western history, with its special relations of church and state, and so may not fully fit societies in which caste, kinship, or religion give a different shape to authority.
- **Decline of traditional authority.** Rapid change, the growth of media and education and the rise of rights movements have weakened old sources of authority, such as the elders, religion and the state, and no clear new basis has taken their place everywhere.

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- **Authority beyond the state.** Global companies, international bodies and digital platforms now exercise rule-making authority without a clear basis in consent, so that the traditional state-centred idea of authority needs to be extended.

8. Critical analysis

The study of authority is built around a central puzzle: how can the right to command be reconciled with the freedom of the person who obeys? Liberal thinkers answer that consent solves the puzzle, since a free person who agrees to be governed is not made unfree by obeying. The difficulty is that most citizens never gave any actual consent. They were born into a state, and the claim that they have consented by staying, by voting or by using public services is a weak one. David Hume made this point in his essay “Of the Original Contract”, where he said that a poor peasant who cannot leave his country can hardly be said to have chosen his ruler. Theories of tacit and hypothetical consent are attempts to meet this difficulty, but they leave doubts.

Weber’s classification is the most used framework, but it has been criticised on several grounds. It defines legitimacy by belief and so gives no standard to judge whether the belief is rightly held. Habermas argued that legitimacy must be tested by reasoned discussion and not only by belief, and that a regime which manufactures belief by propaganda is not truly legitimate. Critics also point out that the three types seldom appear alone, and that Weber’s picture of legal-rational authority, with its stress on the bureaucracy, does not explain well how rules gain moral support. In India, for example, the Constitution derives support from legal procedure and also from the memory of the freedom struggle, which is of a charismatic and moral kind.

The debate between philosophical anarchists and defenders of the state is also unsettled. Wolff’s argument is strong in showing that obedience for its own sake is a surrender of moral judgement, but it proves too much, since it would make every state illegitimate and offers little guidance on how to live in an imperfect society. Raz’s service conception is more practical, but it makes legitimacy depend on whether the authority really helps the subject to act better, and so it permits a person to disobey when he believes the authority is wrong.

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The result is that the question of the duty to obey the law is still open in political philosophy.

The Indian experience brings out another side of the problem. The Indian tradition placed authority under dharma, so that the ruler had no unlimited right. Yet dharma was also used to support caste hierarchy and the authority of the priests, and so it was a source of both restraint and inequality. Ambedkar's critique showed that authority which claims religious sanction can be a means of domination, and that a modern constitutional order must be based on equality and reason. In practice, constitutional authority in India co-exists with caste, community and local strongmen, so that the law may have a formal claim but different real weight in different regions.

Finally, the changing world raises new questions. Large technology companies set rules for speech, markets and data; international bodies make decisions that bind states; and experts shape policy on health, economy and environment. These forms of authority often lack elections and a clear mechanism of accountability. The concept of authority therefore needs to be examined not only in the state, but also in these new fields, and the test of legitimacy must include openness, reasoned justification and the right of those affected to be heard.

9. Authors and books for UGC NET

Author	Book or work	Main contribution on authority
Max Weber	*Economy and Society*; "Politics as a Vocation" (1919)	Three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic and legal-rational
Robert Bierstedt	"An Analysis of Social Power" (1950)	Authority as institutionalised power
R. M. MacIver	*The Web of Government* (1947)	Authority as the recognised right to govern; limits on the state
Hannah Arendt	"What Is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future* (1961)	Authority as distinct from force and persuasion; its decline in modern times
Richard Friedman	"On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy" (1973)	Authority as a right to command and a reason for action independent of content

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Joseph Raz	*The Morality of Freedom* (1986); *Authority of Law* (1979)	Service conception and pre-emption thesis
Robert Paul Wolff	*In Defense of Anarchism* (1970)	Conflict between authority and autonomy
Thomas Hobbes	*Leviathan* (1651)	Absolute sovereign authority from contract
John Locke	*Two Treatises of Government* (1689)	Limited authority based on consent and trust
J.-J. Rousseau	*The Social Contract* (1762)	Authority based on the general will
Chester Barnard	*The Functions of the Executive* (1938)	Acceptance theory of authority in organisations
Herbert Simon	*Administrative Behavior* (1947)	Zone of acceptance
Talcott Parsons	"On the Concept of Political Power" (1963)	Authority as an institutionalised form of power in a social system
Stanley Milgram	*Obedience to Authority* (1974)	Experimental study of obedience
Theodor Adorno and others	*The Authoritarian Personality* (1950)	Personality and attitudes to authority
Jürgen Habermas	*Legitimation Crisis* (1973)	Legitimacy and reasoned agreement
Kautilya	*Arthashastra*	Danda, welfare and administration
M. K. Gandhi	*Hind Swaraj* (1909)	Moral authority, swaraj and non-cooperation
B. R. Ambedkar	*Annihilation of Caste* (1936)	Critique of scriptural and caste authority

10. Practice questions

Long answer questions

- Define authority and explain its nature and characteristics. How is it different from power and legitimacy?
- Discuss Max Weber's three types of legitimate authority with suitable examples.
- Examine the main theories of authority: contract, functional, anarchist and critical.
- Explain the Indian perspective on authority with reference to Kautilya, Gandhi, Ambedkar and the Constitution.

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- Critically examine the relation between authority and individual autonomy.

Medium answer questions

- Distinguish between de jure and de facto authority.
- Explain Hannah Arendt’s view of authority.
- Describe Barnard’s acceptance theory of authority.
- What is charismatic authority? Give its strengths and weaknesses.
- Explain Raz’s service conception of authority.
- Write a note on dharma as a limit on royal authority in ancient India.

Short answer questions

- Define authority in the words of Weber.
- What is legal-rational authority?
- What is meant by the routinisation of charisma?
- What is expert or epistemic authority?
- What is the zone of acceptance?

Very short answer questions

- Who wrote *In Defense of Anarchism*?
- Name the three types of authority given by Weber.
- What is *auctoritas*?
- Who conducted the obedience experiments in 1963?
- Name the Indian text which discusses danda as the basis of order.

Objective questions

1. The threefold classification of legitimate authority was given by (a) Weber (b) Dahl (c) Easton (d) Almond.

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2. Authority which rests on the extraordinary qualities of a leader is (a) traditional (b) charismatic (c) legal-rational (d) coercive.
3. The author of *The Functions of the Executive* is (a) Simon (b) Barnard (c) Fayol (d) Taylor.
4. The view that authority conflicts with moral autonomy is associated with (a) Wolff (b) Raz (c) Locke (d) Parsons.
5. The word *auctoritas* belongs to which language? (a) Greek (b) Latin (c) Sanskrit (d) German.
6. Authority held by right under the law is called (a) de facto (b) de jure (c) informal (d) charismatic.
7. The essay “What Is Authority?” was written by (a) Arendt (b) Bierstedt (c) MacIver (d) Laski.
8. The Constitution of India derives its authority from (a) the President (b) the Parliament (c) the people of India (d) the Supreme Court.

Analytical prompts

- Can an authority be legitimate if the people obey it only out of habit?
- Is charismatic authority a danger to democracy or a force for change? Discuss with examples from India.
- Should a citizen obey a law that he thinks is unjust? Discuss with reference to Gandhi and Raz.
- Do global technology companies hold a form of authority? Does it have legitimacy?

Key takeaways

- Authority is the recognised and accepted right to command, and it differs from force, power and influence.
- Its main features are the right to command, acceptance by the obeying, a ground of legitimacy, limits and accountability.

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- Weber named traditional, charismatic and legal-rational authority as its three pure types.
- Authority may be de jure or de facto, and it may be political, legal, moral, religious or expert.
- Sources of authority include religion, tradition, consent, law, personal qualities, knowledge and results.
- Contract thinkers, Barnard, Arendt, Raz, Marxists and Foucault give different accounts of why authority binds.
- The Indian tradition placed the king under dharma, Kautilya linked authority to danda and welfare, Gandhi stressed moral authority and Ambedkar stressed constitutional and rational authority.
- Authority needs checks of law, rights and accountability to prevent blind obedience and domination.

Twenty books for further reading

1. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*
2. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*
3. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*
4. Joseph Raz (ed.), *Authority*
5. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*
6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*
7. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*
8. J.-J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*
9. Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive*
10. Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*
11. Theodor Adorno and others, *The Authoritarian Personality*
12. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*

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13. Richard Sennett, *Authority*
14. Kautilya, *The Arthashastra* (trans. R. P. Kangle)
15. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*
16. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*
17. Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya (eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction*
18. Andrew Heywood, *Politics*
19. O. P. Gauba, *An Introduction to Political Theory*
20. Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*

Frequently asked questions

What is authority in political science? Authority is the recognised right to make decisions and give orders, which is accepted as rightful by those who obey.

How is authority different from power? Power is the ability to make others act, even by force, while authority is power which has the acceptance of the people. A policeman has authority, while a robber has only power.

What are Weber's three types of authority? They are traditional authority, based on custom; charismatic authority, based on the personal gifts of a leader; and legal-rational authority, based on rules and law.

What is the difference between de jure and de facto authority? De jure authority is held by legal right, while de facto authority is held in fact, though it may not have a legal right, as in a government set up by a coup.

Why do people obey authority? People obey because they believe it is legitimate, because they feel a duty to the law, because it serves their interests, or because of habit, custom and fear of punishment.

How did Ambedkar view authority? Ambedkar rejected the authority of caste and scripture which denied equality, and held that modern authority should rest on the Constitution, reason and the values of liberty, equality and fraternity.

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